

Integrative Medicine Research

journal homepage: www.imr-journal.com

World Famous Institute

Reminiscing on my visits to the Needham Research Institute

Dongwon Shin*

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, Daejeon, Korea

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 June 2013

Accepted 23 June 2013

Available online 16 July 2013



* School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, 373-1, Daejeon 305-701, Korea

E-mail address: newsdw@kaist.ac.kr

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.imr.2013.06.005>

2213-4220/© 2013 Korea Institute of Oriental Medicine. Published by Elsevier. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

I have paid two visits to the Needham Research Institute (NRI) in Cambridge, UK—the first for 10 months in 1997, a year after I completed my doctoral program, and the second visit in 2012, taking advantage of the summer and winter breaks. The full name of the NRI is “Needham Research Institute, a centre for the study of the history of East Asian science, technology and medicine”, and it houses the East Asian History of Science Library. The institute is named after its original founder and long-time director, Dr Joseph Needham.

In the 1950s, Dr Needham began the monumental classic series of published works, *Science and Civilisation in China*. The first volume, titled *Introductory Orientations* was published in 1954, and was followed by *History of Scientific Thought* (1956), *Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and Earth* (1959), *Physics and Physical Technology* (3 volumes, 1962–1971), *Chemistry and Chemical Technology* (11 volumes, 1974–2008), *Biology and Biological Technology* (5 volumes, 1984–2000), and *The Social Background* (2 volumes, 1998, 2004)—a total of 24 volumes. Nearly 6 decades have passed since the first publication, but there are still several volumes left to be released; thus the series is yet to be fully completed. The books received a fervent response from international society, earning the praise, “Perhaps the greatest single act of historical synthesis and intercultural communication ever attempted” Naturally, support gathered and led to the completion of the Institute building in 1991 at its current location, based upon the vast collection of books that had been curated by Joseph Needham.

Since its foundation, the Institute has been visited by a continuous flow of scholars that represent the Korean History of Science Society such as Sang-un Jeon, Seong-lae Park, and Sang-yong Song, and my visit was also made as an extension of those visits. From the field of Korean traditional medicine, Cheong-yeol Lee—then a professor at Kyungwon University—arrived at the institute as a visiting scholar shortly after I did.

When I visited the NRI in the summer of 1997, Dr Needham who had passed away a few years previously had been succeeded by Director Professor Peng Yoke Ho, an authority on the history of Chinese mathematics and astronomy, and by Deputy Director Professor Christopher Cullen who was then with the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies and is now the current director. The librarian was Mr. John Moffett, who continues his work to this day.

The NRI is adjacent to the beautiful Robinson College, and resides inside a pretty building that emanates a Chinese impression. There is a large seminar room that doubles as a reference material room, as well as smaller seminar rooms and about 10 or more individual research offices. I was assigned to a wide room with a good view. Visitors were categorized into short-term and long-term, and since I was scheduled for a whole year, I was naturally treated as long-term. I was the only Korean visitor at the time, but there were quite a few Chinese and western visitors. There were no guests from Japan then, but a Japanese scholar had been there, having concluded his visit around the time I arrived.

At the NRI, visiting scholars were free to pursue their research, and there were no particular duties required of them. However, although it was not compulsory, it was still customary for the visiting scholars to attend the weekly seminars that were held without exception during the semesters. The seminars were mainly on interpretation of original text, but lectures on nonoriginal texts were also permitted depending on the situation. Generally, the visiting scholars presented at least once on the research they conducted at the NRI. Among the regulars at these seminars was Professor Sir Geoffrey Lloyd, a great authority on Greek science and philosophy, who had published a grand work comparing Greek and Chinese philosophy a few years previously. I speculate that these seminars played a substantial role in the progression of his thoughts. The NRI also held larger colloquia on a more irregular basis, and I still remember one with a profound reading resulting in a superb interpretation of an old Han Dynasty text related to military strategy by Cambridge University’s Michael Loewe, the author of *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death* – a book that has also been translated and published in Korea.

In my opinion, the weekly lectures on original texts, covering a tremendous variety of themes including astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and many fields of engineering, are an essential element that forms the identity of the NRI. Through these seminars, visitors come into contact with a wide range of subjects outside their own field of expertise that they would not have faced elsewhere. They can develop an overall sense of the vast topic of science, technology, and medicine, and also train themselves in deep reading and interpretation of historical materials because the lectures are on original texts. These lectures commenced long before my visit, and when I returned in 2012 to the NRI after 15 years, the seminars were still being conducted in the same manner. Attending just once does not give you a sense of the potency of such seminars. However, repeated attendance makes you realize the substantial amount of information you gain from these seminars. More importantly, the seminars give you insight into the contents of other fields based on what you have heard, and they can even take you a step further by leading you to read the related texts.

The presentation I held during my first visit was on *jeon-nyeo-wi-nam-beop*, or the method of converting a female fetus to a male one during pregnancy. The library of the NRI held ample books on ancient to modern Chinese medicine, texts on Dun Huang medicine, and old Korean and Japanese medical texts, which allowed me to track in which books this method appeared and how it changed shape through the ages. The results of this research were later published as a thesis titled *The Archaeology of Jeon-Nyeo-Wi-Nam-Beop* (Historical Folk Studies, Issue 9, 1999). Also during my stay at the NRI in 1997, I completed two books that were published immediately after I returned to Korea: *Life, Aging, Sickness and Death of the Joseon People* (Hangyeorye, 1999) and *Dong-Eui-Bo-Gam in a Single Volume* (Deulnyeok, 1999), which was a collaboration with two other scholars. Completing these two works was a major struggle for me during my stay at the NRI, and the Institute’s vast library was of great source of reference.



My visit in 2012 took advantage of the summer and winter breaks. There did not seem to be much of a change at the NRI. The original text interpretation seminars were still being held once a week, and the research offices were filled with numerous scholars from all over Europe, America, and China. As traditions are enriched over time, such seemingly ordinary happenings continuously add to the repository of seminar materials and the robust network of scholars that pass through the Institute.

Since 2010, as the director of the Korea Science and Civilization History Research Institute established under the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, I was tasked with the responsibility of publishing *Science and Civilization in Korea* (30 volumes in Korean version, 7 volumes in English) and found myself in need of learning from the NRI's legacy that gave birth to the entire works of *Science and Civilization in China*. One day, my eyes suddenly found Joseph Needham's planning notes for the Science and Civilization in China Project, which were framed and hung on a wall at the Institute but had hardly ever caught my attention back in 1997. From those notes, I could witness Needham's struggle to work through the entire history of Chinese science and civilization, and I could feel the joy that he must have experienced when he found the starting thread that would guide him. The current director, Professor Christopher Cullen of Cambridge University, gave me advice on both the content and format of *Science and Civilization in Korea*. He told me in detail to learn not only from Needham's achievements, but also from the issues they were facing from the remaining few volumes of *Science and Civilization in China* that are yet to be completed.

John Moffett, the librarian at the NRI, hopes to build a robust collection of texts on the history of science and medicine of Korea and Japan, not to mention China. He made a request for me to be the intermediary for purchasing the entire set of *Korean Journal of Medical History* published by The

Korean Society for the History of Medicine. I met his request and went a step further by arranging for the purchase of the entire series of *Korean Society for the History of Medicine Newsletter*. When such Korean journals and books are at the NRI, they will benefit Korean scholars most as they will be the primary users of these materials.

Some researchers visiting the NRI might complain about the fact that the Institute does not have any particular means of transferring its knowledge other than through the weekly seminars. In fact, the Institute is different from other university programs and does not open special courses or give instructions on writing papers in English. Group studies and research seem to be conducted by topic, but they only apply to those that are interested in those particular subjects. However, opportunities for knowledge transfer are plenty among the seminars and workshops on Chinese studies, Japanese studies, Korean studies, science history, anthropology, history of medicine and archaeology from Cambridge University. As such, the amount of knowledge one absorbs depends on the attitude of each scholar, and not on any limitation of the Institute.

One aspect I was aware of visiting the NRI in 2012 was that most visiting scholars were Chinese, and numerous Western scholars were there too, but Japanese researchers were almost nonexistent and Koreans were rare as well. For proper research into the history of science in East Asia, I feel that there must be expanded participation from Korean and Japanese scholars. From a certain viewpoint, depending on how we utilize its knowledge, the NRI—a central hub of the world's research on history of East Asian science and medicine—does not belong solely to its owners, but also to all of us who are the subjects of such a legacy. If we could go a step beyond sending researchers and take a role in supporting the Institute's finances, it would be a tremendous boost to an already fine establishment.